



FIGURE 1. Civilian Conservation Corps enrollees from Camp Oregon Caves rebuilding the Exit Trail, 1935. (Photo by George F. Whitworth, OCNM Museum and Archives Collections.)

Introduction

The Marble Halls of Oregon

Historic resource studies are generally devoted to providing both context and the means to identify material manifestations of the past that are significant to the understanding of how people have interacted with their environment in recorded time. Most opening chapters in such a study move beyond the bounds of a specific site (in this case Oregon Caves National Monument) and follow a chronological sequence of use and occupation by aboriginal peoples, European exploration, activities related to initial settlement by white Americans as well as the effects of contact with aboriginal peoples, discovery of the future park site by settlers, and the promotional efforts made to bring tourists there. Inherent in this progression is a peculiarly North American notion of the frontier, one often defined as the zone or region forming a margin of settled or developed territory, but then applied to land held back from settlement by industrial nation states like the United States and Canada for purposes that included both the economic and aesthetic. These "reservations" were established for a range of purposes such as perpetuating municipal access to watersheds and furnishing timber. They sometimes contained certain tracts considered to be unique geological features and thus warranted special management because of their potential to attract tourists.

An industrial nation state eventually produced tourism on a mass scale, since the more numerous middle classes steadily acquired the means to travel (as only the elite had previously) for



FIGURE 2. Statue of a river god in the Grotto, Stourhead Landscape Garden (England). This figure is pointing toward the Pantheon, another stop on a walking circuit designed to present visitors with idealized nature derived from Greek and Roman mythology.

the purpose of experiencing nature as scenery. In most cases elevation to the status of national park or national monument by the federal government did not come without development of transportation networks that increasingly tied peripheral areas such as Josephine County (which surrounds Oregon Caves), to the core of an American industrial nation state. As pack train gave way to wagon road and then to highway, the infrastructure to support tourism in a remote spot like Oregon Caves responded. Promoters, whether they were private concessionaires or govern-

ment officials, developed Oregon Caves according to a long-established archetype of the landscape garden centered on a grotto or other shallow “cave.” Pitched as a resort situated in steep, rugged country clad in towering forest, the national monument and its setting provided at least an illusion of frontier wilderness—one to be explored by foot or horseback once visitors toured the cave as if it were an art gallery. They moved underground from one sculpture to the next, with formal stops dictated by the width of “rooms” and their suggestive decorations.¹

Steadily rising visitation to the monument was first tied to better and wider highways, though the expanding populations of both Oregon and California (the two states where most visitors originated) must also be considered. Annual visits reached their peak during the late 1970s and then leveled off, possibly in response to escalating fees for cave tours, a slump in per capita income (adjusted for inflation), and an increasing number of competing attractions located in the less remote parts of southwest Oregon. The frontier, or the unbroken expanse of mountain peaks and trees seen as wilderness, maintained its appeal to Americans—with many national forests located closer to centers of population than the monument receiving more recreational visits through the 1980s than ever before. As logging in the adjacent Siskiyou National Forest expanded to areas near the monument during the 1960s, it obliterated parts of the transportation network (mostly by placing roads on top of older trails) that once brought visitors to Oregon Caves. Some areas on the Siskiyou came away largely unaffected and retained their association with the monument, mainly because they had been zoned for recreation or held only marginal value for timber production. These places are included in the following narrative because historic resources of Oregon Caves National Monument cannot be understood without their inclusion.

Historic resources are those material parts of the past which relate to a larger “story” or interpretation that is significant for explaining the present. What distinguishes them from other kinds of cultural resources (such as prehistoric artifacts, plants with ethnobotanical significance, or cultural landscapes with associative values ascribed to them by indigenous peoples) is their linkage with source material in the archival record. These sources are generally in written form, but also include photographs and oral accounts associated with sites, structures, districts, and objects created after 1827, the date of Euro-American contact with the Indians who

lived in the area around Oregon Caves. To understand the monument's historic resources and why they might have value or importance, it is necessary to develop a context or background even if the resulting interpretation cannot be separated from a cultural lens that is relative rather than absolute.²

Setting

Oregon Caves National Monument consists of 488 acres located in Josephine County, Oregon. All but eight acres form a rectangle that is completely surrounded by the Siskiyou National Forest. The Oregon Department of Transportation nevertheless maintains a right of way through the national forest as part of State Route 46 (also known as the Caves Highway) which terminates at the monument. The remaining eight acres are located in the town of Cave Junction (though four of which are not in federal ownership), where an interagency visitor center stands next to the Caves Highway. A possible addition to the monument, one proposed by the NPS through a general management plan approved in 1998, follows adjacent ridgelines to encompass another 2,377 acres of what is still national forest land at present.

The national monument is situated within a rugged area whose name *Siskiyou* is generally applied to the mountain complex found north of the state line that is six miles from Oregon Caves. This complex extends well into northwest California (where it is known as the Klamath Mountains) and is characterized by old rocks and diverse geology, botanical richness, and steep topography. These qualities have limited human settlement in the mountains around Oregon Caves due to the lack of arable land, though minerals and game prompted periodic forays lasting from a week to several months during the last half of the nineteenth century. Permanent settlement, whether by Indians or newcomers such as the Chinese or white Americans, was usually confined to the Rogue River and its tributaries, though what became the monument is not all that far from the larger basin drained by the Klamath River.

West of Oregon Caves lies the Illinois River, one of the Rogue's main branches, whose valley serves as the primary gateway for most visitors—especially those who reached the monument once road access became available in 1922. The Illinois Valley contains the incorporated towns like Cave Junction and Selma,

along with several smaller communities such as Kerby and O'Brien. Far outstripping the valley's population is Grants Pass, seat of Josephine County, located 50 miles north of Oregon Caves along the Rogue River. Grants Pass has maintained a link with the monument in a variety of ways, most famously by being the home of a booster group called the Oregon Cavemen for much of the twentieth century. A less popular access route to the monument originated from the small town of Williams. Located northeast of Oregon Caves, it lies at the upper end of the Rogue's other major tributary, the Applegate River. Another route connects Happy Camp and habitations along the Klamath River with the Illinois Valley. Like the route from Williams, it provides an alternative for the adventurous motorist bound for Oregon Caves.

Purpose and significance

Within that fuzzy and ill-defined idea realm of land management called "heritage," it is not surprising to find that an area's purpose and significance changes, or at least remains vague, through time. The presidential order establishing Oregon Caves National Monument, for example, began by making reference to "certain natural caves...are of unusual scientific interest and importance, and it appears that the public interests will be prompted by reserving these caves with as much land as may be necessary for the proper protection thereof as a National Monument."³

This proclamation then expressed the monument's purpose in only two ways. Both of these provisions referenced what constituted protection. The first stated explicitly that the monument is the dominant reservation over adjacent lands in the Siskiyou National Forest if use of the latter interfered with preservation or protection of the Oregon Caves. The other warned all "unauthorized persons" not to "appropriate, injure, remove or destroy any feature," or to settle any of the lands reserved by the proclamation.⁴

Federal officials eventually interpreted the proclamation to allow for the development of a show cave, one with road access for automobiles and supporting infrastructure that included commercial services like hotel accommodation. During the first quarter century of the monument's existence, it functioned as one of the numerous resorts created on national forest lands in Oregon, where the Forest Service granted monopoly privileges to local con-

cessionaires who ran the operation and made specified improvements. The government's role at Oregon Caves largely consisted of supplying infrastructure where its concessionaire could not, with enforcement of the proclamation's provisions for protection almost always limited to when the operator made the Forest Service aware of violations. With Forest Service cooperation, an area of 30,000 acres surrounding the monument functioned at least nominally as a game refuge between 1926 and 1948. Activities such as camping and logging could take place in the refuge, though these uses remained at minimal levels and had negligible impact on the monument due to the lack of road access beyond the Caves Highway during that period.

The monument remained under Forest Service administration during the first 25 years of its existence, yet the agency promoted its recreational appeal resulting from improvements made there rather than any inherent distinctions which bestowed national significance on Oregon Caves. According to one guide aimed at promoting the recreational possibilities in Oregon's national forests, the completion of a road to the monument in 1922 made it a major scenic attraction, instead of "an interesting but inconveniently accessible local attraction" known only to a few people.⁵ Even as a major attraction for visitors, however, the monument's appeal centered on the cave tour. This was where the marble formations bore a "more or less striking resemblance to a great variety of objects," according to a promotional folder issued by the Forest Service during the mid 1920s.⁶

By contrast, the NPS saw a need to develop more rational justifications for why Oregon Caves merited the status of national monument once it assumed control of the area in 1934. Much of the agency's reasoning lay rooted in its past, when the NPS had to sift through numerous proposals to establish national parks and decide which ones deserved legislative support shortly after Congress created the bureau in 1916. Oregon Caves received a lukewarm endorsement from Roger Toll, then the main NPS reviewer of candidate areas for the national park system, in 1932. Toll saw the formations as interesting and varied, though the cave's rooms were small and its connecting passages described as narrow. Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico (which contained the largest room known at the time and some very tall formations) furnished an enviable standard for comparison in what he called the "national interest," but Oregon Caves also possessed a scenic



FIGURE 3. Scenic photography drew its conventions (such as juxtaposing human figures next to much larger sublime elements like enormous trees) from earlier landscape paintings. Frank Patterson took this postcard view next to Big Tree in 1923. (OCNM Museum and Archives Collections.)

setting of forested mountains where varied plant life piqued the curiosity of botanists. Toll also noted that “several types of flora merge here and a number of rare species are found.”⁷

The next attempt by the NPS to formally describe the significance of Oregon Caves came during an update of the master plan for the monument in 1945. By that time the plan had evolved from a roll of drawings first produced by NPS landscape architect Francis Lange in 1936 showing how the monument could be further developed. Within a decade the master plan assumed a largely narrative format containing information about resources, interpretive themes, circulation patterns, facilities, and projected needs. The significant “theme” included the monument’s mountainous setting as an “outstanding scenic attraction of southern Oregon,” the rare plants living in that setting, a large Douglas fir 14 feet in diameter known as “Big Tree,” and the geological story covering “a vast period of time.” NPS planners placed the cave formations within the envelope of geological processes, describing them as largely products of solution. This characterization (one that could be understood by those having only the slightest acquaintance with science) did not subsume the older view of caves. The resulting calcite deposits were thus said to sometimes assume “fantastic or grotesque shapes” and in others “beautiful or inspirational forms.”⁸

By 1952 the NPS began to prioritize the elements of significance in its master plan for the monument, placing geological and biotic distinctions of the Klamath – Siskiyou region at the top. As the “oldest permanent land mass adjacent to the present Pacific shoreline,” the extent and magnitude of the story evident in the endemic plants or rock types at Oregon Caves and vicinity had no exact parallels, but were somewhat analogous to the Great Smoky Mountains as a focal point for studying evolution. The cave was still “spectacular,” but NPS officials placed greater emphasis in the plan on expanding the monument to include 2,910 acres of adjacent national forest land, where Brewer spruce and Port Orford-cedar were “rapidly being depleted.”⁹ Just three years later, however, the superintendent of Crater Lake National Park (who had management oversight of the monument at the time) disputed the notion of Oregon Caves possessing national significance. At a time when legislation to expand it appeared to be “imminent,” he recommended disposing of the area since Oregon Caves possessed little (in his view) to justify the status of a national monument.¹⁰

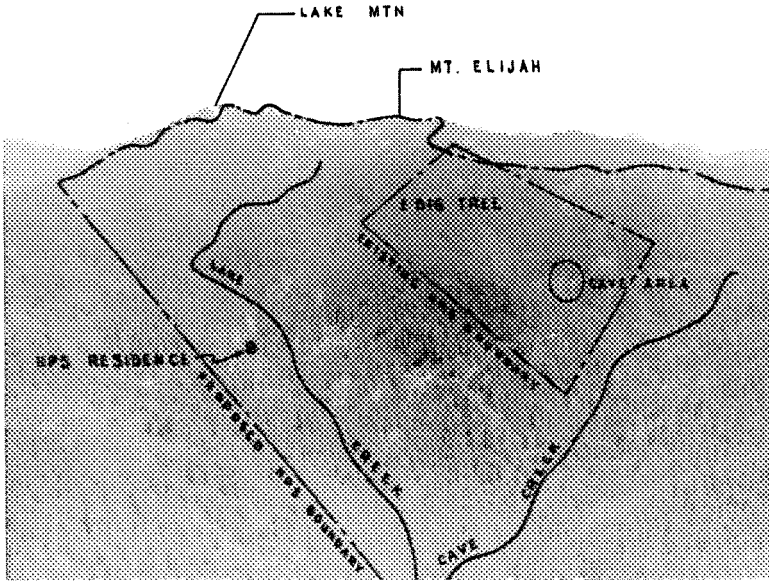


FIGURE 4. Aerial view of Oregon Caves and vicinity, 1949. (OCNM Museum and Archives Collections.)

The first prospectus for Mission 66 (a massive ten year development program aimed at improving park infrastructure in anticipation of the fiftieth anniversary of the NPS in 1966) thus characterized the cave as “mediocre,” and disparaged the monument’s geological story as “not unusual.”¹¹

Subsequent master plans tied to the Mission 66 program removed the overtly negative language about Oregon Caves, but statements of significance were short and terse, while any praise for the monument remained faint.¹² By 1975 master plans had become public documents, but the NPS opened the plan’s “resource evaluation” section by characterizing the cave as small and incapable of handling large numbers of visitors when compared with other well-known caves in the United States. Against that standard (and probably because of its moderate size), Oregon Caves possessed a “relative lack of significance,” though it remained a “major regional resource” providing an educational experience through guided tours. As if to compensate for the cave’s “inadequacies,” the master plan stated that the monument also preserved an example of primeval forest, one whose value might become increasingly important for sightseeing and scientific

studies as the surrounding area was utilized for timber production and other consumptive activities.¹³

The master plan's assessment of the monument in 1975 remained unchanged in agency planning circles throughout the 1980s, at least according to subsidiary NPS documents such as the internally distributed Statement for Management.¹⁴ An updated SFM in 1994, however, highlighted processes at the monument over comparisons with the size, beauty, and endemic fauna of other North American caves. It also attempted to tie surface features such as old growth forest to cave processes, but omitted the built environment even after the Oregon Caves Chateau had attained national historic landmark status in 1987 and then became the centerpiece of a district listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1992.¹⁵

Acknowledgement of historic resources being tied to the monument's significance had to wait until December 1997, when the NPS released a draft general management plan document for public comment. Mention of the five buildings (chateau, chalet, ranger residence, guide dormitory, checking station/kiosk) and their designed landscape features as being listed on the National Register came in a separate paragraph which followed wording that closely resembled language about the importance of cave processes and old growth forest found in the earlier SFM.¹⁶ According to the general management plan draft, paleontological discoveries made in 1995 contributed to making the monument a "nationally significant site for well-preserved Pleistocene mammals," though the cave system and tour route were also deemed nationally significant by the time the plan assumed final form in August 1999.¹⁷

Organization of this study

The following chapters are organized chronologically, as in most historical narrative, but also thematically in order to structure interpretation of the past which provides context and significance for historic resources. In order to tie the study together around a general theme, this work is built around the idea that Oregon Caves is part of larger regional development in the western United States. That development has had to be subsidized, in large part by the federal and state governments, in order for industries like tourism to help a local economy dependent on primary production (mining, logging, agriculture) and services. Tourism, especially

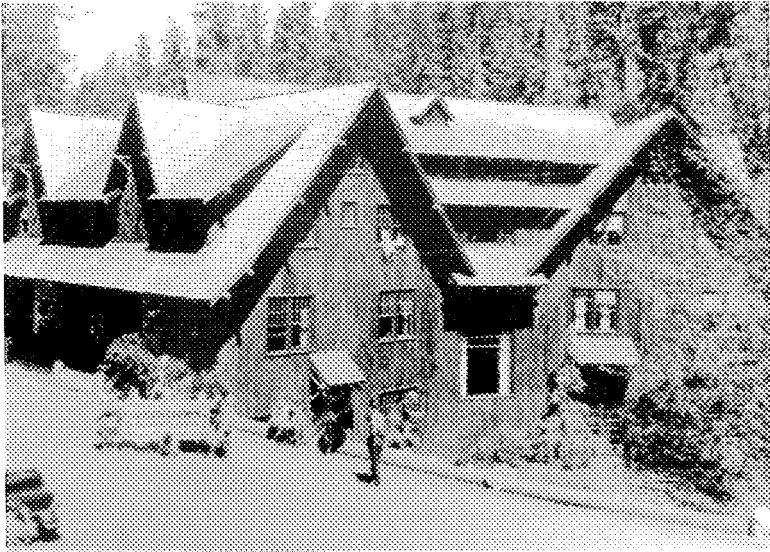


FIGURE 5. Cavemen in front of the Oregon Caves Chateau, 1952.
(Photo courtesy of the Josephine County Historical Society.)

the type open to the average person, requires subsidies in form of building transportation infrastructure (usually highways) to be a viable part of an economy. This is a precursor to government projects to develop utility connections or facilities that are aimed at expanding the recreational appeal of an area, as well as the use of private investment capital to develop commercial visitor services such as those found within Oregon Caves National Monument.

Each chapter in this study is tied to what is really an associated subtheme, starting with the Pacific Northwest in general (and Josephine County in particular) being a remote but internal colony in relation to the larger nation state for much of the nineteenth century. Its importance increased with the dawn of transportation links that accelerated the growth of a market economy, a topic highlighted in the second chapter, something which expanded to eventually include tourism. For Oregon Caves to contribute to that economy in any significant way, however, government had to forge a partnership with local boosters to obtain the necessary infrastructure. With chapter three as backdrop, chapter four delves into the specifics of how the monument and its immediate surroundings were developed and marketed as an experience having its origins in the earlier landscape gardens of western Europe. Postwar changes at Oregon Caves are the focus of chapter five,

with special emphasis on its place in an expanding local tourist economy, mainly to show how both the built environment and other factors affecting visitor experience have changed over the half century that elapsed since World War II ended. Although a major planning effort served to bring about a dramatic shift in management direction over the intervening decade, the end date of 1995 was chosen because a cave restoration project culminated that year. Recommendations derived from this study furnish something of a conclusion, though they should also be seen as a starting point to examine how past events affecting Oregon Caves might be viewed more critically.